

LOCAL/REGION

Cutting a New Path: P-TECH

By ERICA CARLSON
E2CCB Public Relations Specialist

Last spring twenty-nine 13-year-olds committed to being part of a new educational model — combining elements of high school, college and industry — designed to launch them on a trajectory to an associate degree and a career.

The past fall, the ambitious ninth-graders began charting a course through hands-on learning designed to prepare them for the rigors of college courses and projects designed to build their communication skills, collaborative abilities and problem-solving approaches.

The program is P-TECH: Pathways to Technology: Early College High School and the place is the WNY STEM P-TECH College & Career Academy, currently housed at the Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES LoGuidice Educational Campus in Fredonia. There is an emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math at P-TECH.

“The best thing is hands-on classwork. They don’t have us sitting around a desk all day — we are moving around getting connected to the work we are doing,” said Jesse Jenkins, a P-TECH student from Pine Valley.

“P-TECH is like no other school in this area — we give students the opportunity to experience project-based learning — learning by doing — in a relevant and meaningful way. We encourage students to step outside their comfort zones; they are challenged in a supportive environment with high expectations,” said Robin Brown, E2CCB Associate Director. “The phrase ‘college and career ready’ takes on new meaning — because the expectation is there from the moment they step in the doors of the school. The teachers are as innovative as the school, using instructional approaches that not only result in knowledge and skill development, but relevance into the classroom.”

To outsiders, a day in the life of a P-TECH student is remarkably different from that of a typical high-schooler. And yet, the reality is the day-to-day experience of a P-TECH student is simultaneously remarkably similar

to that of a typical high-schooler.

For all its intense, career-focused, sophisticated atmosphere, P-TECH is still, at heart, a bunch of kids figuring out what they want to be when they grow up. They engage in hands-on learning, collaborate maturely with their peers and are on a path toward career success, but they’re not exactly missing out on the traditional high school experience, either.

The P-TECH students conjugate verbs in Spanish class, learn about the human body in health class, play basketball in gym class and eat lunch in a cafeteria. But in the high-tech learning laboratory, they also build robots, shoot and edit videos, code apps and dissect deer hearts. Some recently competed in the popular STEM Wars at JCC, which attracted more than 700 students from across the region.

“I am inspired to do my work and get good grades because I want to succeed in this program,” said Brendin Potts, a P-TECH student from Falconer.

Eden resident Kathy Zdjelar is the mother of P-TECH student Robbie Goodrich, and she is shocked — and pleasantly so — at the growth she has seen in her son since he enrolled.

“The teachers and staff at P-TECH have transformed my son,” said Zdjelar. “When he started in seventh grade, I couldn’t get him to do his homework. He is a good kid, but I wasn’t sure he would pass seventh or eighth grade, that’s how uninterested he was.”

One day an invitation to a P-TECH information session arrived in the mail and she threw the letter on a desk, immediately dismissing it. But Robbie retrieved the invitation, saying, “No, mom, you gotta go to this meeting.” Zdjelar went and asked a lot of questions, but wasn’t convinced it was the right decision. But Robbie was sure.

“What 13-year-old is going to decide they’re going to be a machinist or a welder?” said Zdjelar in disbelief, describing her initial bewilderment at the P-TECH concept. “But you have to be aware of the fact that your kid may not think

and learn like other kids. You can’t be afraid that your child doesn’t fit into cookie-cutter learning.”

“As a parent, I had to come to the realization that sitting in a classroom and listening to lectures and not being interactive is not an environment he learns well in,” said Zdjelar, noting her son learns best by working with his hands. “I told him this is a big decision and you’re going to commit to this program.”

And commit he did. By his own (and his mother’s) admission, Robbie is a different student — a more successful, more engaged, more confident student — because of P-TECH.

“I don’t worry about his grades,” said Zdjelar. “It got to the point where he was just a totally different student. He’s happy, loves going to school, loves to learn. It’s a new start that has turned him around and made MY life less stressful.”

She no longer dreads asking Robbie about his homework or arguing about school.

“He’s so positive when he comes home. We enjoy having conversations about school,” she said, noting he tells her about the robots they build and the projects they work on. “He’s a totally different kid. There is a whole turnaround in his attitude about school.”

Socially and athletically Robbie also continues to thrive. He still plays sports in his home district and on weekends he gets together with his Eden schoolmates. Zdjelar says Robbie has matured through getting to know and collaborating with fellow P-TECH students. He better understands everyone is different and is learning how to work with people who have opposing opinions and still be respectful.

“It’s teaching him how to grow up a little bit, too,” said Zdjelar. “Parents and school districts just have to give P-TECH a chance. Not everyone learns the same way.”

Instead of joining their home district classmates for their first day as high school freshmen, the inaugural P-TECH cohort journeyed to a specially designed space at the LoGuidice Center to embark on their first year of



Submitted Photo by Erica Carlson

Three students in the WNY STEM P-TECH College & Career Academy of the Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES collaborate during the Rube Goldberg competition at STEM Wars held in March on the Jamestown Community College campus.

high school as college freshmen.

A specially designed curriculum has been created to prepare students for the academic challenges of college work, scaffolding skills that employers need throughout the program and completing the required courses for a New York State Regents diploma. The customized learning environment is filled with constant activity as mentors visit and guest speakers and group activities take over the spaces.

Students use 1:1 technology throughout their day and each has been issued a Chromebook for their coursework and homework.

This year students have taken the equivalent of two years of math in preparation for starting their college degree work next year. This spring in their robotics-heavy math class, the students discuss programming languages, data analysis, statistics, exponential fractions, absolute value, sequences and organization.

“My son is a do-er,” said Dunkirk resident Melissa Krzyzanowicz, whose son, Caleb, is a member of the first P-TECH class. “It was a struggle through those middle school years. He had trouble sitting still — like most kids do at that age. So it was an eye-opener to see beyond what he saw in Dunkirk and to see what’s possible in terms of taking charge of his own education.”

Caleb’s first year at P-TECH has been a positive experience, and Krzyzanowicz is enjoying watching her son’s academic interests expand as he communicates more with her about school.

“He is excited to tell us what he’s working on, even if I don’t know what he’s talking about,” said Krzyzanowicz. “He shows me what projects he’s working on — and he hasn’t done that since about first grade.”

For students, and especially parents, who are considering applying to P-TECH, Krzyzanowicz encourages them to attend a presentation and talk to staff.

“It was scary, taking that leap,” said Krzyzanowicz. “But it absolutely was the right idea. He’s into this, he gets it and he’s a part of it.”

The WNY College & Career STEM P-TECH Academy was formed through a collaboration with public education, higher education and employers to help provide opportunity for students to attain a college degree and prepare them for high-skills jobs of the future in our region. Jamestown Community College, the Manufacturers Association of the Southern Tier, Western New York Dream It, Do It, the Chautauqua County Industrial Development Agency, the Chautauqua Chamber of Commerce, Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES and 21 public school districts across our

region support this unprecedented collaboration.

The program is expected to move to the former School 6 in Dunkirk in the fall of 2017, when building renovations are complete.

IS P-TECH RIGHT FOR YOU?

There are high expectations for P-TECH students. They lose the familiarity of being with their longtime classmates and support system to embark on something new, which can be exciting and intimidating. Getting to know each other is crucial to building trust within the P-TECH team. Like a mantra, the staff reminds them that P-TECH is a transition, it is a process, it is an adjustment.

The students are a tight-knit group with adult aspirations, but they are still kids. They aren’t making it up as they go along, but they are setting a precedent for every cohort that follows. It’s a transition. It’s a process. It’s an adjustment.

P-TECH students are working on improving their focus. They are sharing facts, fears and frustrations while envisioning their future. They are taking a leap of faith in their education, and having some fun while doing it. They’re finding their way.

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E-recycling event on campus Saturday

The State University of New York at Fredonia will partner with State Senator Catharine Young, Time Warner Cable and e-recycler Sunnking to offer a free e-recycling event for area residents on Saturday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the double-tiered parking lot off Ring Road (Lot 7) on the Fredonia campus.

“As we all begin our spring cleaning, many of us have old or broken electronics that we no longer use. Ensuring these devices are disposed of properly, and in a safe manner so that our area landfills are free of hazardous e-waste is an important part of everyone’s spring cleaning. This event will provide Chautauqua County residents with a free, environmentally-friendly way to recycle their unwanted electronics. We have held an e-recycling event for several years now, and it continues to grow and be incredibly successful. I strongly encourage area residents take advantage of this year’s event so that we can continue to protect our environment,” Senator Young said.

Fredonia Director Facilities Services Kevin Cloos noted, “This is a terrific community event. Members of Fredonia’s athletics teams, staff and student organizations will provide support, and proceeds will benefit student scholarships. We are hoping to exceed last year’s record participation. It’s a great partnership and we appreciate Senator Young’s leadership with this event.”

During last year’s event, 176 vehicles were unloaded, filling eight semi-trailers with pallets of old, outdated electronics that otherwise may have been destined for a local landfill.

To help ensure the smoothest flow of traffic, those looking to recycle materials should enter the Fredonia campus from the main entrance at 280 Central Ave. in the Village of Fredonia. Then, take the first right at Ring Road, and follow the road around to the double-tiered lot on the right hand side of the road. Volunteers will be on-hand to provide the unloading of all recycled materials, as well as with traffic direction.

Acceptable items include, but are not limited to, laptop and desktop computers, televisions and monitors, printers, scanners, copiers, microwaves, telephones, and other small electronics and appliances. Some items that cannot be recycled include: Freon containing devices, such as refrigerators, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers; cathode ray tubes; smoke and carbon monoxide detectors; and alkaline batteries. A full list of items that will be accepted during the event can be found at: www.sunnking.com/consumer-business/acceptable-materials/.

National Infant Immunization Week at hand

MAYVILLE — The Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services is observing National Infant Immunization Week during the week of April 16-23. This is a Center for Disease Control and Prevention initiative to raise awareness about the importance of childhood immunizations.

Vaccines are among the most successful and cost-effective public health tools available for preventing disease and death. Health officials around the nation remind parents to protect their children’s health by immunizing them against vaccine-preventable childhood diseases.

“Before age two, all infants can and should be vaccinated against 14 preventable childhood diseases like whooping cough and measles,” said Christine Schuyler, Chautauqua County Public Health Director.

“Immunization is a shared responsibility and together, we can help protect our babies and the entire community by preventing and reducing the spread of infectious diseases.”

All parents are encouraged to have their children immunized by their pediatrician or contact the Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health division, for information on how to receive vaccinations. The Vaccines for Children program provides vaccines to children who are underinsured or whose parents or guardians may not be able to afford them.

“Maintaining high immunization rates by vaccinating on time, every time is the key to keeping dangerous diseases away from our communities,” said Schuyler. “Because of the success of vaccines in preventing disease,

some parents may not have heard of some of today’s vaccines or the serious diseases they prevent. These diseases can be especially serious for infants and young children. That is why it is important to follow the recommended immunization schedule to protect infants and children by providing immunity early in life, before they are exposed to potentially life-threatening diseases.”

To find out what vaccines your child needs and when, ask your healthcare provider, visit the New York State Department of Health website at www.health.ny.gov or call the Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Service, Public Health division weekdays at 1-866-604-6789. Additional information is available online at www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents or via phone at 800-CDC-INFO.

Civic calendar

All items on the calendar are subject to cancellations. Please call meeting organizers to confirm the meeting is still scheduled.

Brocton
Today — Village of Brocton board of trustees meeting, village hall, 7 p.m.

Cassadaga
Today — Cassadaga Village Board meeting, 22 Mill St., 7 p.m.

Dunkirk

Today — Harbor Commission meeting, Stearns Building, 6 p.m.
Thursday — Finance Committee meeting, city hall, 4 p.m.

Gowanda
Today — Village Board budget workshop meeting, 6 p.m., village hall

Ripley
Thursday — Ripley Board of Education meeting, elementary library, 6:30 p.m.

Sheridan
Thursday — Sheridan Village Board meeting, Village Hall, 7:30 p.m.

Silver Creek
Thursday — Silver Creek Village Board special assessment rate public hearing, Village Hall, 6:30 p.m.

Sinclairville
Today — Sinclairville Village Board meeting, 8 Lester St., 7 p.m.

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